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ABSTRACT

Using folklore as educational material helps students to understand and appreciate their society and themselves, while developing their reading interests. This paper suggests ways in which folklore can be used in independent teaching units, as supportive material for motivation, and as recreational material in reading/language arts classes. The suggested learning activities include discussing what folklore is and what students remember from their childhood experiences; presenting selected readings in folklore under a specific topic, such as how traditional beliefs and superstitions have affected people throughout history; studying folk songs; having students write their own folk songs or folklore; and having students discuss local history with senior citizens and community service people. Guidelines for preliminary preparation in folklore studies, a sample worksheet that elicits students' childhood experiences, a bibliography, and a listing of related documents from the ERIC system are attached. (RL)

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Language of the American Land - Developing and Applying an Appreciation of
Dialect and Folklore in Reading Instruction

Using Folklore in Teaching Reading

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Someone once asked the great American folksinger, Woodie Guthrie, to define folksongs. He replied simply, "Folksongs are the songs folks sing." For our purpose here today--we might define dialect and folklore, respectively, as the way people talk and the heritage they acquire informally or incidentally in the context of their lives.

A desire to understand, appreciate and express one's personal, cultural identity appears to be a natural part of personal growth. Certainly, Roots, the current bestseller by Alex Haley should be cited as an outstanding illustration. Teaching reading can be a creative response to this human need. Reading involves bringing meaning to the printed page as well as taking meaning from it. The cognitive cannot be separated from the affective. Experience is needed to acquire feelings as well as understanding. Through developing and applying an appreciation of dialect and folklore, reading instruction can be life related and interesting.

Alex Haley, the author of Roots wrote recently:

In this country, we have been like people who live in the same house and tend to stay in our own rooms, doing no more than peeking out and then ducking back. If only we could all come out together, say in the living room, and learn more about each other we couldn't help but benefit. It would show us our future as a collective people--retaining, being proud of, our differences, but coming together in collective strength. That, I believe, is the hope for America.

It is our hope that our presentation will contribute to this end.

Folklore and what it can contribute to education is not a recent discovery in American schools. The stories of Paul Bunyon, Johnny Appleseed, Rip Van Winkle and even Pocahontas have been in schools since the beginning of American education. Teachers have long seen the value of local history and regional legends in creative activities such as plays, pageants, songs, and dances and tales.

The recognition of folklore as a formal study in the curriculum, however, has been slower in coming. Only recently have colleges and high schools begun to offer recognition to the value of folklore. Yet, not all teachers have used folklore with the insights that the material has to offer. Various kinds of folklore can be effectively used in at least three ways:

1. Independent teaching units
2. Supportive material for motivation
3. Or as recreation

The teacher must remember the suggestions presented are just suggestions. The plans and material must accomodate the situation. The plans for using folklore must grow generically from the community, culture and the mixture of your own class.

The values to be gained from using folklore in teaching reading are threefold:

1. Folklore provides material for a better understanding of society and the student himself.
2. Folklore provides an immediate means for motivation for a variety of studies. It helps to develop a more wholesome respect for others and it enables the teachers to contribute to satisfying social and intellectual needs.
3. Through projects and writing of local history or legends, the teacher can help the students gain a deeper insight into the community they live in.

The purpose now is merely to suggest ways in which these objectives can be met.

Students have heard the word folklore used before but rarely can they explain its usage or function. Therefore, preliminary preparation of the

class is usually necessary. The "I Remember Sheet" (included in Appendix 1) and the "What is Folklore" (Appendix 2) sheet will help you prepare the class.

Following the discussion/lecture on what folklore represents the class is now ready for the selected readings. Remember, these stories are only examples of the printed folklore. There are many more stories which could be used for this purpose. Discussion of the stories evolves around what ideas or happenings are dealt with by the characters in the stories. Their words often reveal their hopes, dreams, and fears of what was happening around them. History tells us that Columbus sailed across the Atlantic and discovered America. However, the folklore of the adventure tells the fears of the crewmen toward the sea monsters and the enticing mermaids that would call the ships to their death. History tells us that the Indians grew corn for food, but their folklore reveals to us their concepts that corn would only grow out of the bodies of the good Indians. Ancient people were surrounded by a hostile world whose mysteries they couldn't understand and whose forces they couldn't control. They used magic and superstition to ward off evil, to encourage good luck and to read the omens of the future. Today we have the explanations of science to interpret the world, but the compelling power of magic and superstition lives on.

Students can discuss the meaning of superstition and the reasons for its powerful effect on people throughout history. Other activities explore various types of superstitions and the particular periods in the human life cycle when superstition becomes most important. In addition to these traditional beliefs, students can investigate the enormous range of folk beliefs comprising knowledge and attitudes passed on by the oral tradition. Several activities involve students in collecting superstitions, weather lore, and other folk beliefs from their own communities. They will not only become aware of the widespread presence of folklore but also hopefully come to view it as a part of their background. An essential characteristic of folklore is its

individualism. The touch of the individual is evident in folk crafts, folk talk, and folk wisdom. Students should be encouraged to appreciate the oddities and uniqueness of folk superstitions.

Folk music also brings us closer to the people of the past and the present. Folk music offers a diversity to the silence of the written folklore. American folk songs are rooted in the everyday experiences of people. They tell about love and hate, joy and sorrow, war and peace, and work and play through the uniqueness of individual experience and emotion. The tradition of passing the songs from generation to generation by word of mouth gives them a unique human vitality. Folk songs combined history and folklore with the personal reactions of the people who sang them. They reflect the functional role that music used to play. For example, work songs not only made work more enjoyable; they also set a rhythm which made the work easier.

Activities for the student: Have them create their own folk music from their own experiences and emotions. Research activities might include investigating other types of folk songs like the ballad, the blues, spirituals, love songs.

A basic characteristic of folk music is that it is transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth. This process inevitably involves changes in the original song to suit a new time, new locale or new people. An important aspect of folk art is its individuality. It is the unique product of one man or woman. A folk song for example includes references to the particular situation of the singer; proverbs and lore are created from the individual experiences of one family circle.

American folk music encompasses a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, song forms and purposes. Choose some aspect of folk music on which to do

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further reading and research. Here are several suggestions: Cowboy country songs, love songs - every area of the country and every period of our history has produced songs about true, false, fulfilled and unrequited love. Work songs - in addition to the songs of sailors, railroadmen, and cowboys, there are work songs of miners, farmers and so forth.

The writing of their own folklore is a period of recreation and self expression for the students. They should be encouraged to write what they feel. Concentrate more on the content rather than form. Concentration on form and gramatical structure often frightens the students and is not always conducive to creativity.

Some of the activities you might use with the students are:

1. Take them to a local hotel and have them write a story as to what might have happened in that hotel years ago.
2. Interview cabbies in your town and see what interesting stories they have to tell about the people they service.
3. Talk with grandparents and ask what their early lives were like.
4. Interview a favorite folk hero of the past - role playing.
5. Research the names of town and cities in your area to find out where the names came from.

Many high school students ranging from 4th to 8th grade reading level, can barely write a complete sentence let alone an essay or story. However, when they are given the opportunity to develop something on their own a spark of light seems to come forth.

One example that I recall is when I asked one of my classes to write a story about their Christmas holiday traditions. Bobby was sitting in the back of the room squirming in his seat. When I went back there and asked him what the problem was he replied that he didn't know where to begin. I

explained that he should just sit back and relax and let his mind think only of the things that made his Christmas's fun. The stories were due in two days. When the day came for the stories to be read, I asked for volunteers. Of course no one was overly anxious to get up in front of the class and read. Bobby was the third student to read his story. Bobby proceeded to read to the class a story about a boy who never had a Christmas like everyone else. His family was too poor to even have a special meal let alone presents. He told how this boy, Tom, hated this time of the year and all the other kids in their new clothes. Bobby explained how Tom felt cheated out of something that should be his. As the story proceeded we learned that the past summer Tom's mother died which forced Tom to go live with foster parents. When Christmas came this time he received lots of clothes and toys. But something wasn't right. Why didn't he feel excited and happy now that he was getting all the things he always wanted at Christmas time? Tom thought about it for a long time and finally realized he really had gotten presents all those years - he realized it now that he didn't have it anymore, his real mother. At the end of his reading Bobby just stood there. The class didn't quite know how to react to his story. Then Bobby told the class that he really knew how Tom felt because the same thing had happened to him. If I had never asked the class to write a story I may never have known what the real Bobby was like. The story was not at all grammatically sound, but Bobby offered a part of himself to the class through his story and he did not have to worry that I was going to red mark it.

I do sincerely hope the final observation made by teachers and students is as gratifying as my observation is at the end of each experience with folklore. It never ceases to amaze me how much background our students "carry around with them." They are full of stories, superstitions, songs, and ideas just waiting to be brought forth.

Folklore represents our past, our present, and our hopes for the future. If you let your students experience a taste of folklore, you will open a new horizon for them as far as creative reading, writing, and listening goes.

Remember, children of all ages have a unique contribution to offer any classroom in the form of their own language, and their own experiences. Folklore is the spark that my start the fire.

APPENDIX 1

"My Problem and How I Solved It"

I actually had two problems: one, an American Literature book containing very little information on American Folklore, and a desire to incorporate folklore into my curriculum; and secondly, a reading class in dire need of high interest reading material. The idea of teaching a unit of folklore to both classes seemed to "kill two birds with one stone."

The following material may apply to both American Literature classes and reading classes with variance depending upon the depth of information given to the students by the instructor.

Preliminary Preparation of Class:

1. Have students get into small groups and prepare a "I Remember" sheet. (Included in Appendix 1) The purpose of this activity is to get the students talking about what they can remember about their past and what they may pass on to their families.
2. Explain to the students the many sides of folklore. (See Appendix 2)

Classroom Activities:

1. A representative selection of stories from each unit is read out loud with the students following along. At the conclusion of each story, discussion evolves around what has been communicated to the reader, and what is revealed about the people in the stories. (See Appendix 3)
2. Folk music is played and discussed in the same terms as the stories are discussed. (See Appendix 4)

3. (Appropriate exercise for preholiday school day) Ask students to share with their classmates a custom which is usually traditional for the specific holiday. For example Christmas traditions are part of our American Folklore: foods, songs, decorations, stories.
4. What many students consider folklore is old stories or ideas passed down through several generations. However, they often fail to see that they too can produce their own folklore. The following activities are designed to develop modern folklore.
 - a. Have students talk to a cabbie in their city then write a story about his work, life or stories he has revealed.
 - b. Take students to an old town hotel. Let them walk around and get the "feel" of the hotel. When they have returned to class ask them to develop a story about the old hotel.
 - c. Have students talk to grandparents, great aunts, uncles, or older persons who may be able to share some stories about what they have been through.
 - d. Have students observe slides of large, older buildings and then write a story about what might be happening inside.
 - e. Discuss a current news happening and have students write their own version with different characters.
 - f. Provide the students with a tape and tape recorder. Ask them to role play and interview their favorite hero of the past.
 - g. List the names of towns, counties, and states in your specific area. Ask students to write explanations as to how these names came about. This can be done orally through group presentations also.

"I REMEMBER ... "

Group # _____

Group members _____

Discuss with the members of your group the following categories and try to remember YOUR past.

A. My favorite childhood story is about...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

B. Having this food for special occasions is a tradition in our family...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

C. The ghost story we used to always tell...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

D. Thunder and lightning were explained as...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

E. The superstition I really believed in...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

F. My grandparents always used to say...

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

APPENDIX 2

WHAT IS FOLKLORE?

"In 1872, Harriet Beecher Stowe at 60 wrote out of her childhood experience: 'There was no theater, no opera,... When winter came, and the sun went down at half past four o'clock and left the long dark hours of the evening to be provided for, the necessity of amusement became urgent. Hence, in those days chimney-corner storytelling became an art and an accomplishment. Society then was full of traditions and narratives which had all the uncertain glow and shifting mystery of the firelight hearth...'"¹

I. Definition

- A. A collection of traditional narratives, old timers' memories, pithy sayings, ghost stories, ballads, exaggeration, superstitions, and remedies.
- B. Provides insight into what people of the past (or present - future) hoped, thought, and feared during their lives.

For example: Columbus discovered America (history)
 Crews' fears and hopes (revealed through their stories about the trip.)

II. Folklore Units

A. Early American Folklore

- 1. Explorers - "Sea of Darkness"
- 2. Indian Folklore - "Evil-Minded and Good-Minded"
- 3. The Colonists - "Tom Quick, The Indian Slayer"

B. Regional American Folklore

- 1. The Backwoodsmen - "The Tragedy at Potts' Hill"
 (Northern)
- 2. Yankees and Yorkers - "Manhattan Hoax"
 (Eastern)
- 3. Southerners - "The Rattlesnake That Played Dixie"
- 4. Westerners - "Jesse James and the Widow"

C. Modern American Folklore

1920 - present - "The Girl in the Lavender Dress"

APPENDIX 3

FOLK MUSIC

I. Colonial Period

- A. "I Will Give My Love an Apple"
- B. "The Bonny Boy"
- C. "Psalm 100"
- D. "Springfield Mountain"

II. American Revolution

- A. "Dying Redcoat"
- B. "The Fate of John Burgoyne"
- C. "Paul Jones' Victory"

III. Western Movement

- A. "Hush Little Baby"
- B. "The Fool of Forty-Nine"
- C. "T'Aint Gonna Rain No Mo"
- D. "Ride on Old Paint"
- E. "The Colorado Trail"

IV. 1900's - present

- A. "When Johnny Comes Marching Home"
- B. "Pack Up Your Troubles"
- C. "We Shall Overcome"
- D. "One Man's Hands"
- E. "Little Boxes"

FOOTNOTES

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